DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 682 CS 213 557

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TITLE A Different Kind of Hero: Teaching the "Tale of Genji" to American Undergraduates.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (23rd, Pittsburgh, PA, March 27-29, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Literary Criticism; Literary Genres; *Literary Styles; *Literature Appreciation; *Reader Response; Undergraduate Students; *World Literature
IDENTIFIERS Heroes; *Japanese Literature; *Tale of Genji (The)

ABSTRACT

A sophomore-level course surveying world literature through the seventeenth century emphasizes the theme of heroes and heroic codes using western classics and the "Tale of Genji," a fictional account of an idealized Japanese courtier and gentleman written in the tenth century AD by the court lady Murasaki Shikubu, and often considered to be the world's first novel. In the "hero" Genji, students find a hero who is not only different from the classic occidental figure, but in many respects almost diametrically opposed to it. Genji combines personal beauty and refined aesthetic sensibility. He is a practicing poet, a scholar of Chinese literature and history, a dancer, a musician, a painter, and (most important of all) he is one who is deeply sensitive to "mono no aware," the pervasive sense of the transience and essential sadness of life. All these traits and more set Genji apart from the classical western hero; moreover, students have a great deal of difficulty with Genji's usually refined but inexhaustible sexual adventuring. There are, however, some similarities between Genji and the traditional hero, and students are quick to perceive them, but they insist that he differs from western heroic figures far more extensively and dramatically than he resembles them. The sharp contrast Genji provides forces students to reconsider and perhaps even modify their responses to that traditional heroic figure. (RS)

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# A Different Kind of Hero: Teaching The Tale of Genji to American Undergraduates

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delivered to
College English Association March 1992
Pittsburgh, PA

In my sophomore-level course surveying world literature through the seventeenth century, I emphasize the theme of heroes and heroic codes. But in addition to such western classics as The Iliad, The Odyssey, Don Quixote and The Song of Roland, I also include The Ramayana, one of the great epics of India, and The Tale of Genji, a fictional account of an idealized Japanese courtier and gentleman, written in the tenth century A.D. by the court lady Murasaki Shikubu, and often considered to be the world's first novel. Although the attitudes and behavior of Rama in The Ramayana depart in certain respects from the Homeric and chivalric warrior codes that my students are familiar with, they see in him many parallels with Achilles or Odysseus or Roland, although they of course find Rama and his milieu much more exotic. However, in Genji they find a "hero" who is not only different from the classic occidental figure, but in many respects almost diametrically opposed to it.

The values and standards of behavior that Genji embodies and that are perceived in him by the author and the other characters (especially the female ones) often astonish, even offend many of my students, steeped as they are in the ethos of a culture that, having evolved from its roots in the Homeric warrior code, continues to prize violent or at least aggressive behavior,

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Marlboro-man virility, materialism, athletic vigor, an aesthetic sense that doesn't go much beyond sports-car styling, and an intellect whose parameters often seem limited to deciding whether Miller Lite is better because it is less filling or tastes great.

Genji is indeed good-looking, but the author speaks not of a square jaw or rugged physique but rather of his beauty. He is indeed so beautiful as a child that many at court fear he will not live long, great beauty (like other personal accomplishments) being an omen of potential disaster in this superstitious society. As he matures into a young man, the other characters often perceive a sort of radiance in his beauty--he comes to be referred to as "the shining one"--and even during one moment of great sorrow we are told that "he was so handsome in his grief that Koremitsu [his servant] wanted to weep" (53). When he visits his father-in-law's social gathering during the festival of cherry blossoms, his combination of personal beauty and exquisite taste in selecting and blending the colors of his robes "quite overwhelmed" even the cherry blossoms themselves (143).

Indeed, his refined aesthetic sensibility is one of his most notable traits. Genji is keenly attuned to the delicate beauty of the natural world; he not only responds to it emotionally but is most adept at capturing and expressing it through his great skill as a painter and poet. Like the other court ladies and gentlemen he composes poems spontaneously and publicly and is admired for the flowing delicacy of his calligraphy and his ability to choose just the right shade and texture of paper for the poems through which he not only seduces women but literally

converses with them and others. As do all court gentlemen, Genji perfumes his clothing with a delicate scent of his own devising. His singing and his grace as a ceremonial dancer are such that they can bring tears to the eyes of an entire assembly, even the emperor himself:

> Genji and To no Chujo danced "Waves of the Blue Ocean." To no Chujo was a handsome youth who carried himself well, but beside Genji he was like a nondescript mountain shrub beside a blossoming cherry. . . . Genji scarcely seemed of this world. As he intoned the lyrics his auditors could have believed they were listening to the Kalavinka bird of paradise. (107)

Genji is moreover an accomplished player on both the Japanese and Chinese kotos, and is moved by the playing of others.

A scene early in the novel epitomizes for me the pervasiveness of Genji's aesthetic sensibility. As he departs one morning from a secret romantic liaison, he pauses "to admire the profusion of flowers below the veranda." His mistress's lady-in-waiting follows him out, and he is so struck by her aster robe, "which matched the season pleasantly," and by the elegance and grace with which she wears it and her "gossamer train," that he asks her to sit with him for a while. "The ceremonious precision of the seated figure and the hair flowing over her robes" strikes him as being "very fine." When a "pretty little page boy" then appears among the flowers and breaks off a morning glory blossom to present to Genji, the set piece is complete and so perfect that Genji feels the urge to capture it on canvas

(37).

The classic western hero is not known for his intellect. Even the wily and resourceful Odysseus is essentially a man of action, not contemplation, and his mental faculties are largely devoted to outwitting enemies and responding to life-threatening situations. But Genji is not only a practicing poet, he is a scholar of Chinese literature and history who, on the occasion of a Chinese rhyme-guessing contest, dazzles even the university professors who are present (223).

Even more important is his sensitivity to mono no aware, the pervasive sense of the transcience and essential sadness of life, which can be found in even the most ordinary of events. Frequently translated as "the evanescence of things," aware is perhaps the major thematic motif in the novel. All of the characters possess aware, but Genji does so to the utmost extent. Thus sadness is an inseparable facet of Genji's response to beauty, whether the beauty emanates from a melody on the koto, a woman, or a natural scene. Once, as Genji travels to a shrine to plead with one of his mistresses not to go into religious seclusion, he traverses "a reed plain of melancholy beauty," where "insects hummed sadly" among plants bereft of their flowers by winter. "His more perceptive men saw how beautifully the melancholy scene set him off" (187). There is sadness in the beauty, but there is also beauty in the sadness. At the end of the twelve-chapter abridgment of the novel which I use in my class, Genji, after a period of disgrace, has not only been restored to his former rank and offices but is even more

influential than before and has emerged triumphant over his rivals in a painting contest that has considerable political implications. Yet instead of exhilarartion or even satisfaction, he is only more convinced than ever that "men who rise to rank and power beyond their years cannot expect long lives" and that "[f]urther glory could only bring uncertainty. He wanted to withdraw quietly and make preparations for the next life," and so he begins making arrangements to move to a remote mountain village (359-60).

Other traits that set him above his peers include his polite respectfulness to all, even his political and social opponents, and an often self-effacing modesty, especially when contemplating or admitting his weakness for women. He frequently displays generosity and spontaneous concern for others, especially those who have suffered as a result of his actions--a far cry from Achilles' petulant demand to Thetis that many Achaians must fall to Trojan blades while he remains sulking in his tent. For example, in spite of Genji's shock and fear at the sudden and unexplained death of his mistress Yugao, "his confused thoughts centered upon the girl. There was no room for thoughts of himself" (50), and he gives the rootless Ukon, Yugao's lady in waiting, a home and employment in his own household. When he is scanadlously discovered in Oborozukiyo's bed, "the immediate business was to comfort the lady" (228), and he is empathetically aware of the suffering of the Rokujo lady and others who have come to grief, frustration, or embarrassment as a result of the vagaries that inevitably come with the passing of time. Perhaps

Margaret Berry best sums up the positive qualities of Genji when she says that

> Genji's life is devoted to an exploring of his world for beauty; his search is solely to give, to receive, to bring into being as much creative affection,. . .as much psychological delight in perfection of form as possible. In his long series of amours--despite impetuousity and irresponsibility--the Heian prince basically pursues only beautiful and enduring, though not exclusive, relationships in which he can promote the well-being, the capacities for beauty of the beloved while himself savoring union with that which is beautiful. (5-6)

The matter of his amours is probably, for my students, his most distinctive departure from the traditional heroic role, whether western or eastern. They accept Achilles' relationship with Briseis and, presumably, others; the Mycaenan age, after all, was a primitive one, and students can understand the concept of women as war booty, without endorsing it. They are even willing to accept Odysseus' long liaison with Calypso and, somewhat less readily, his year with Circe. After all, he does have as his ultimate goal reunion with his wife and son, his relationships with Calypso and Circe are essentially at the behest of the gods, and he turns down Nausicaa. Rama is fiercely and completely faithful to his wife Sita, and Roland is an essentially sexless figure.

But my students have a great deal of difficulty with Genji, right from the opening chapter, when he conceives a childhood

yearning for his stepmother Fujitsubo which, as he grows up, becomes a consuming and compulsive passion that is only partially satisfied when she bears him a son. He has affair upon affair, often simultaneously, sometimes with older women like the Rokujo lady and, especially, the near sixty-year-old Naishi; sometimes with women of his own age; and even with Murasaki, whom he abducts and installs in his household when she is ten, then raises for several years like a younger sister or daughter, and then, in effect, rapes as a way of signaling to her that their relationship is now to change from filial to sexual. My students are unconvinced by the author's rather pro-forma criticism of Genji at such times, and they resist her constant insistence on how devastatingly attractive everyone finds him. Nor are they impressed by his servant Koremitsu's rationalization that because women find him so attractive, "to refrain from these little affairs would be less than human. It was not realistic to hold that certain people were beyond temptation" (35). I remind the students that in the tenth-century court society which the novel reflects, promiscuity was common, even encouraged, among men and women alike; that his was a polygamous society to begin with, marriage, like that among European monarchies, being for political and economic purposes, not for love; that social judgments were more often made on aesthetic than moral principles; and that the author was too refined and elegant herself to provide any specific, let alone lurid, erotic detail. Nonetheless, my students' reactions to Genji's usually refined but inexhaustible sexual adventuring tend to vary from

astonishment to disapproval to indignation to outright disgust, and I sometimes find myself in the rather awkward position of defending him by reiterating all his other, clearly admirable (if, by western standards, rather unorthodox) traits as a "hero."

All of the foregoing is not to say that Genji has nothing in common with the traditional heroic figure of Homer or the chivalric epic. There are parallels. He is of course an aristocrat. He has the charisma of a Hector or a Roland. Like the classic western hero he is larger than life in personality and in attainments, different in kind from those of an Achilles or an Odysseus as these might be. In fact, in the diversity of his accomplishments he displays the Homeric ideal of arete, which H. D. F. Kitto translates as all-around "excellence" (171-72).

And particularly, like the Homeric heroes, like Roland, like the protagonists of Greek tragedy, he is flawed. Achilles' initial withdrawal from the Trojan war was acceptable to his peers; but he puts himself in the wrong when, in Book Nine of the Iliad, he refuses Agamemnon's exceedingly generous compensatory offer, and this decision leads to the death of his dearest friend Patroclus. Odysseus has to learn the hard way that when he gives in to the warrior's impulse to boast over a victory, he gets himself and everyone else in serious, even fatal, trouble. Roland is blinded by his arrogant conviction that as a Frenchman and a Christian he is immeasurably superior to the heathen Saracens.

Genji too is guilty of excess, of his own kind of hamartia.

This excess grows out of his sexual drive, but it is a matter of whom he chooses to pursue, not how many. As he himself admits, "[i]t was his nature to be quickened by danger" in matters of love (225). This can explain his attraction to the volatile Rokujo lady, who directly if unintentionally causes the death of his wife Aoi and his mistress Yugao and immeasurable grief to Genji. He is fascinated not only by the ten-year-old Murasaki herself but by the challenge of spiriting her away before her father comes to take her, hiding her away in his Nijo palace, and molding her over the years into his ideal woman. Oborozukiyo's undeniable charms merely augment the danger of carrying on a forbidden liaison with a woman who is at once the intended wife of his brother (the emperor) and the sister of his bitterest enemy Lady Kokiden--and doing all this in Kokiden's own house. The discovery of this affair leads directly to his eclipse at court and several years of lonely, painful exile at Suma and Akashi, and like the errors of Hector, Achilles, Odysseus, and Roland it is entirely his own doing.

But his most excessive act, because it is the most forbidden of all, is his relationship with Fujitsubo. That she is his own stepmother is, though technically not incestuous, nonetheless highly improper (McCullough 135). But she is moreover the favorite mistress of Genji's father, who is also the emperor at the time. When it becomes clear--at least to Genji and Fujitsubo--that her son is Genji's and not the emperor's, her resulting anxiety is so intense and unrelieved that it ultimately, even after the emperor has died unaware of the truth,

leads her to sever her ties with the world by becoming a nun. As for Genji, he must suffer not only the fear of discovery, but also the guilt of knowing he has terribly deceived his father, whom he genuinely loves, and the frustration of having a son he can never acknowledge, even after the son himself becomes emperor.

My students are quick to perceive Genji's similarities to the traditional hero, but they insist, and I agree, that Genji differs from the western heroic figures we have studied far more extensively and dramatically than he resembles them. As Earl Miner has said,

> The dance, music, poetic composition, painting, the beautification of one's enviornment, a sensibility that is both touched by nature and able to convey its beauties to others--these no doubt seem tame accomplishments set beside the wrathful greatness of Achilles or the thirty-man-power grip of Beowulf. And the concern with love--which enables the novel to develop Genji's fullness of personality--is apt to make him seem either 'effeminate' or altogether profligate. (7)

The sharp contrast that Genji thus provides with the classic figure of the warrior hero they have inherited from the European cultural and literary tradition forces students to reconsider and perhaps even modify their response to that traditional figure. Some of them even end up admiring Genji.

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